

“The Little Maid from Israel”

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Intro to the Series:

Writer and artist Michelle Gaugy explained that “Children - since they have no experience - have *spontaneity*. . . children may inadvertently say things that seem fresh and pure, like “the world is so beautiful” --or “uncontaminated” by experience, like “every day can be so full of love and we can smile-- and call it children’s wisdom. But it’s not. Because actual wisdom, by definition, derives from experience.¹ We will learn this today about the little maid from Israel.

We will learn more about this in the childhood stories we will return to over the next few weeks. Experience, no matter how early for a child, is a valuable frame for them to weave together words into phrases that have memorable, and lasting effects on our lives. Since so many of us are getting on up in years we have, walked ourselves away from the creative, innocent circumstances that went for the simplest but most profound insights in our lives. So, along with these stories we will attempt to answer an important question about how we adults are still facing the challenges of our lives by employing the simple, childlike wisdom we accumulated since our own childhood.

Over the next few weeks we will revisit a nameless little servant girl whose whole amazing story is told in only twenty words. Her wisdom rises out of her experiences of a tension between tragedy and faith. She will get us into the first narrative. The others are:

August 19 The Young Man and His Lunch
August 26 Rebekah and a Jar
September 2 Joseph and his Honor
September 9 Jairus’s Little Daughter
September 16 (Back to Church Sunday) Young Jesus: Where Did He Go and Why?

¹ <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-wisdom-of-children> (accessed August 11, 2018)

Begin Sermon:

Now, I found it interesting this week when I took a survey of some of you about what you knew about the Little Maid from Israel. I couldn't find anyone who had ever heard of the story. I imagine you have, maybe just not with that title. It's there in the Old Testament in the Book of Kings. It appears in the Elisha narratives. Elisha was the prophet was followed Elijah.

When I tell you that the story of the little maid can be found in the longer narrative about General Naaman, a Syrian who was suffering from leprosy and went to be healed in Samaria, you would identify the story. But, perhaps you might miss the little maid. Naaman had apparently tried everything to deal with his disease. He was apparently a wealthy man who was willing to offer a reward for his healing to the tune of what today would be a value of almost \$2.5 million dollars. He was well connected to the Syrian army and apparently a force to be dealt with as a warrior. He was powerful enough to be sent by the King of Syria (Ben-Hadad III) to the King of Israel to find a healer. And, by the time the story has ended he has become a person of faith in the God Israel.

In the story there are many characters we may have forgotten since the first time we heard this story. Besides General Naaman and the two kings there were Aramean (Bedouin) raiders, Naaman's unnamed wife, Elisha the prophet, Elisha's messenger, and Naaman's officers. Finally, the list of characters includes a little girl who had been taken into captivity who ended up in Naaman's household as a servant to his wife. The story for us who are adults might focus on the mighty man Naaman, his affliction, and his political influence, and his financial power. However, I imagine that for a child whose wisdom does not know yet about mighty men, or deathly afflictions, political influence, or financial power might be more interested in the little maid and how she ended up in the story. I wrote at the top of notes: A mighty warrior, a little maid.

Yet, she was not without her own dark history. How old she was at the time we do not know, but most speculate that she might have been old enough to be taken seriously, not too old to remember her former culture, but not too old to have been subsumed by the Syrian culture as a servant or the spouse of some other captive. She may have been a bit older than a little child since the text suggests that she was a lady-in-waiting, and not a child laborer. We might think of her as twelve but not much more advanced in years than that. She may have lived in a well to do home, no doubt with a sympathetic woman of the house, but to keep her

wisdom in perspective one must remember the dark tragedy of her tender childhood. Someone said that there is tragedy in the phrase, “brought away captive out of the land of Israel,” She adds, “nothing but a slave, the spoils of war.” There is no need to emotionalize this because we who are adults know what that means. However, I think it makes the wisdom she shares in the narrative more memorable.

When the General had reached the end of his rope he had sought counsel from his wife. It was his wife who then said to him what the little maid had offer as a solution to his terrible illness. ““If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.” In fact, as I read Naaman’s story repeatedly it became apparent to me that this story revolves around the little maid’s wisdom far more than all the actions of the other players in the story. But, why? Writer Mary Hallet said, “one of the most amazing things about the Bible stories is their sheer restraint. With one or two deft strokes a scene is painted, a character sketched, or an incident described . . . This is I say something astonishing in the terse poetry of the Bible.” So, is the little maid’s story—restrained, painted with just a couple of clever strokes, the little maid has been sketched, and a whole narrative was needed to memorialize its force.

The more we read the words, we see someone we wish we could have known. We want to have her come here an tell us her story. Her few words were brought to the attention of a powerful General, two monarchs, and a national prophet, and to 100s of generations of Jews and Christians. There was no resentment in her words for the people who held her captive. She mentions no vindication in the General’s deathly sentence. Her words were said in the spirit of grace. She appeared to be courteous in her speech. Importantly, she played her role with an award-winning appearance. And, still young enough to recall the home of her ancestors, she could recall from her youthful experiences where teachings about a providential God outweighed the darkness of human tragedy. In her own way, she rose to the star of the story. It seems so strange to me that we never heard of her before, nor after, and we don’t even know her name.

While studying the text I found the line that pointed me to the conclusion that this story is about the little maid, her resilience, and her youthful wisdom. The narrator said that when Naaman had done what the prophet had told him to do Naaman looked down at his own skin and saw his own flesh was then like that of a child. Perhaps in the miracle there is more than a dramatic story about healing. Perhaps in this there is a wisdom like what Jesus said about children. They have the capacity to lead us back to our innocence way before we have become overlaid with familial and society influences, before we were contaminated by or experiences. Over time our lives have been sullied by so many shadowy realities.

We have been a part of human history that is something like Naaman's leprosy which took away his joy, his hope, and even his future. Powerful as he was, he saw no end to his own bondage. The little maid lived in her own kind of bondage and yet was liberated by the her joy, hope, and future anchored to miracles in faraway places by powerful God who transcends space and time.

It is safe to say as we begin this series that returning to the stories of youth in the Bible as well as our own youthful stories is an important spiritual experience. I wrote in my notes two lessons I wanted to teach in this series. I hope you heard these themes today: 1) Little roles can generate great outcomes. And, 2) There is boundless worth in our confirming God early in life for those times that will surely come when we are taken captive in our own human dilemmas.